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REMARKS

ON US-VN Human Rights Dialogue

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Hearing on "The Human Rights Dialogue with Vietnam: Is Vietnam Making Significant Progress?"

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Members of the Committee,

I am honored to have the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the human rights situation in Vietnam and the human rights dialogue with Vietnam in particular.

On this important event, I would like to extend our thanks to Mr. Chairman, to Chairman Chris Smith and to committee members for what you have done for the betterment of Vietnam, as well as for the advancement of human rights and freedom for all Vietnamese. I am certain that freedom defenders in Vietnam from all walks of life as well as political leanings and backgrounds, share one common dream. It is the dream of a New Vietnam -- a Vietnam of the twenty first century, a Vietnam of democracy and progress, a Vietnam for all Vietnamese people, regardless of religious and political differences. Also, I want to take this opportunity to reaffirm my belief that all Vietnamese-Americans and Vietnamese overseas throughout the world have no other aim than a free and democratic Vietnam, where justice and human dignity are respected under the law and by the government.

It is conceivably clear why both Vietnamese overseas and people of conscience inside Vietnam --most of whom are communist veterans (their number increases every day)— have shared a common dream and a common movement for a free Vietnam for the past three decades. Though having accepted a free market economy –reluctantly at first, and not fully even now-- the communist leadership of Vietnam has persistently held on to their monopoly of political power and ideology. Their monopoly, becoming increasingly irrelevant in this post-communist, post-bipolar age of globalization, has made dysfunctional the development of a free market economy and a civilized and equitable society. Consequently, today's Vietnam is facing a paradox in that an increase in

materialistic standards is coupled with a decrease in dignity, equitability, and quality of life. This contradiction has not only hindered and slowed down economic development but also --more dangerously-- has resulted in serious problems, namely ecological damages, corruption, abuse of power, social injustice, cultural and educational debasement, as well as discrepancies between the rich and the poor, between cities and villages and highland areas.

In this age of globalization, this contradiction between free economy and authoritarian politics cannot last long before it erupts into social and political disorder. During the last three decades we have witnessed this disorder in many developing countries, from Central to East Asia. Today we are witnessing the same happening in China and Vietnam. In China, according to official sources, in 2004 there were 74,000 demonstrations all over the country, with an average of 400 highly frustrated participants in each demonstration. For the first time since Tienanmen the army has had to open fire at one of such revolts some months ago. In Vietnam, in February 2001 army troops crushed down peaceful demonstrations of about 20,000 Central Highlanders. Some National Assemblymen just revealed that thousands of petitions had been submitted to the government but have not been resolved. As a result, violence clashes between angry villagers and military troops have erupted in many villages. In recent months, worker strikes have spread from Southern to Northern Vietnam, involving ten of thousands of lowly paid and badly treated workers. Export of workers also leads to women trafficking which debases Vietnamese women's rights and dignity.

Negative developments and human rights violations have become so abundant and widespread that dissent and frustration now explode not only from high profile political dissidents and religious leaders. Thanks to the policy of openness preceding the CPV Congress, voices demanding political changes, or the second renovation (Doi Moi II), have been heard openly in the media, or expressed by an increasing number of progressive CPV members, intellectuals, and people of conscience in the last few months. This policy will end soon when the 10th Party Congress takes place in April 18-25. However short it may be, this period of openness has sent a clear message to all concerned people: Vietnam needs the second renovation, which is the political transformation from an authoritarian and one-party controlled government to a democratic government which is accountable to the people. The government should be checked directly by the people through their free and independent civil and political organizations. Without such drastic political changes, it will take a long and unstable road before Vietnam can become a civilized and responsible member of the regional and international community. I believe that this view is clearly shared by all those who have observed and/or contributed, in varied ways, to the development of Vietnam over the last 20 years since the first renovation began. It has been the persistent demand of all political activists, both communist and non-communist, in Vietnam since then. Until now, communist leaders have not accepted to carry out this crucial second renovation.

CPV is now preparing for its 10th Congress as the CPV Central Committee has just ended its 14th and final meeting. Most of the details of the Congress have been decided, including policies and programs of development for the country, and the leaders of both

the party and the government for the next five years. What has been happening before and during the Central Committee's meeting signals little changes in the cultural and political spheres. Both leaders of the banned Unified Buddhist Church, the Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang and the Most Venerable Thich Quang Do, continued to be under house arrest at their own pagodas. Normal religious activities of Hoa Hao Buddhist followers are cruelly cracked down. Protestants in the Central Highlands continue to be discriminated against, and local officials and security forces still tightly control their religious activities. Leaders of recent worker strikes are hiding from police supervision. Political dissidents continue to be harassed or house arrested. Their telephones and Internets are cut or confiscated. Former Director of the Party's Marxist Philosophy Institute and a well-known dissident from the 1960's, Mr. Hoang Minh Chinh and his wife were harassed and assaulted by plain clothed security personnel, right inside their front yard. Some days ago the out-spoken and young dissident, Do Nam Hai, an Australia-educated engineer who proposed a national referendum, was beaten in public, arrested and interrogated by police for many days. His computer and data CDs were confiscated. Internet users continue to be closely watched, and many have been reportedly detained while surfing pro-democracy websites in public Internet cafés. Hundreds of defenders of political and religious freedom are still in jail, most without trial and whose names and whereabouts are being unknown to international observers.

In the face of the above serious human rights violations, American and international intervention and pressure for the improvement of human rights are not only necessary but should also be considered as an integral part in the policy of promoting better relationship with Vietnam. Respect of human rights should be considered as a condition for non-humanitarian assistance programs if we want assistance programs to be beneficial to the people and not the dictators. It should also be a condition for the Vietnamese government to be integrated fully into regional and international community. I want to emphasize these points because I think that the attitude of the Vietnamese government toward human rights has not basically changed. They still consider respect of human rights a favor that the government gives to the people –and only under international pressure-- and not the duty that the government must perform to the people.

I therefore support the human rights dialogue only with some conditions. Three years ago the US-Vietnam Human Rights Dialogue was cancelled by the US State Department because Hanoi did not match their words with action. Now that the dialogue has been resumed per Hanoi's request it is both imperative and opportune for the Administration and Congress to pressure Hanoi for more deeds than talks. Hanoi must be engaged in a process, via the dialogue, to account for incremental progresses in human rights. The dialogue should not be used again as a forum for propaganda or political games. The dialogue can open a new stage in the US-VN relationship, and help boost the long-awaited political transformation in Vietnam. This transformation fits well with Secretary Condoleezza Rice's new policy of transformational diplomacy. I believe Vietnam urgently needs this transformation now. But this policy will not be fully implemented unless and until, at least, the following are achieved:

1. The administrative detention Decree 31/ CP is abolished. This decree allows local officials and police to detain any person up to two years without trial.
2. Leaders of the Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam and other religions are free to travel, to assemble, and to disseminate information to carry out their religious activities. Also, religious organizations are free to publish their religious newsletters and publications.
3. Hanoi releases all people being imprisoned for having expressed peacefully and openly their political opinions.
4. The Vietnamese people have free access to non-pornography websites, and publications.
5. UN, international, and American human rights observers and NGOs are allowed to visit Vietnam and to open their offices in Vietnam to monitor human rights violations.

Mr. Chairman and Distinguished Members of the Committee,

Those are the minimum concrete results that I think the dialogue should achieve during its coming rounds of talks. Otherwise, it will be a waste of time and energy, and will only become the tool of a political game for Hanoi. As such the dialogue will not be supported by defenders of human rights inside and outside Vietnam. Worse, it will damage the image of the United States as a country which has highly upheld the ideals of freedom and democracy since its founding days.

Thank you for your attention.

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